



File Code: 1950/2650

Date: September 3, 2015

Little Missouri National Grassland Prairie Dog Management Project Proposed Action

Introduction

The Medora and McKenzie Ranger Districts, which comprise the Little Missouri National Grassland (LMNG) of the Dakota Prairie Grasslands (DPG), have developed a Proposed Action for a Prairie Dog Management Project. The Project Area encompasses the LMNG, which is approximately 1,025,000 acres in the counties of McKenzie, Billings, Golden Valley, and Slope.

The Forest Service is proposing to implement the Dakota Prairie Grasslands Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) prairie dog direction to enable it to begin a program of prairie dog management as well as to respond to unwanted encroachments onto non-National Forest System (NFS) lands and to divert existing colonies away from non-NFS land. The proposed action also calls for adaptive management so that a variety of tools can be used as needed to change management to meet LMRP goals.

The activity of the black-tailed prairie dog, while natural on the National Grasslands, can have impacts to agricultural production, land values, and public health. Land ownership on the LMNG occurs in an intermingled pattern. This land ownership pattern results in situations where prairie dogs spread between National Forest System (NFS) lands and adjacent non-NFS lands, whether private, state, or federal. Many land owners are concerned about the encroachment of prairie dog colonies between Forest Service and private lands.

Because the Project Area is throughout the LMNG, a map displaying the proposed activities within the 137 prairie dog colonies can be found online at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/dpg/landmanagement/projects>. This map may also be mailed to interested parties using the contact information below.

Background

The 2002 Dakota Prairie Grasslands LRMP Record of Decision (ROD) recognizes the importance of the national grasslands increasing prairie dog numbers, improving prairie dog sustainability, the importance of prairie dogs to black-footed ferret recovery (ROD, p.7) as well as other key species such as burrowing owl and ferruginous hawk (Northern Great Plains Management Plans Revisions Final Environmental Impact Statement (NGP FEIS), pp. 3-265 to 3-266). The ROD also recognizes that as a good neighbor, the DPG should control prairie dogs in cases where there is *unwanted* colonization (ROD, p. 7).

On May 5, 2004, U.S. Department of Agriculture Deputy Under Secretary David Tenney directed the DPG to work with state and county officials and local landowners to aggressively implement the spirit and intent of the good neighbor policy identified in the ROD and to specifically work with local interests and landowners to use the full suite of management tools available to them to reduce the potential for prairie dog colonies to expand onto adjacent non-federal lands.



Being responsive to the dynamics of prairie dog expansion in an intermingled ownership pattern can be challenging, especially when faced with unwanted encroachments on a nearly annual basis. Several prior project decisions on both districts of the LMNG in 2004, 2007, and 2008, as well as a Section 18.1 review in 2014 allowed for prairie dog control at site-specific locations, using both lethal and non-lethal management activities but these actions proved to have only short-term benefits and do not address the long-term program requirements.

Resolving unwanted encroachments may be accomplished using a variety of methods, including land exchange; land purchase; conservation easement; or cooperative poisoning. Discouraging future encroachments may be done by using an array of non-lethal methods, including visual barriers; high structure vegetation by creating narrow zones of lightly-grazed grass along certain boundaries to prevent expansion in that direction; and increasing predator effectiveness.

Desired Condition

The 2001 NGP FEIS estimated that implementation of the selected alternative ("Final 3") would result in 5,400 to 9,400 acres of active prairie dog colonies on the LMNG within the life of the DPG LRMP (NGP FEIS, p. H-98).

For prairie dog complexes, the LRMP specifies the development of up to four prairie dog complexes for conservation of prairie dogs and associated species (LRMP Chapter 2, pp. 2-7, 2-14). A complex is defined as having at least 10 prairie dog colonies, a minimum of 1,000 acres. The DPG LRMP identifies three sites to establish and expand prairie dog complexes:

- Indian and Boyce Creek on the Medora Ranger District (p. 2-15);
- Vicinity of Theodore Roosevelt National Park – South Unit on the Medora Ranger District (p. 2-22)
- Horse Creek drainage of the McKenzie Ranger District (p. 2-22).

The LRMP also directs that the Horse Creek drainage area of the McKenzie Ranger District be managed for black-footed ferret reintroduction (Management Area¹ 3.63) (LRMP, p. 3-27). Managing prairie dog populations for this project will set conditions to allow for black-footed ferret recolonization in the future.

Lastly, the Desired Condition would be to have minimal conflict over prairie dog encroachments on NFS lands and other ownerships and to follow the spirit and intent in the implementation of the "good neighbor policy" would be realized. Cross boundary encroachment may be acceptable to some adjacent landowners such as the National Park Service.

Existing Condition

Overall the LMNG contains about 454,000 acres (soils, slope, vegetation, and hydrology) capable of supporting prairie dogs. According to the most recent 2012 survey information, there are 137 known prairie dog colonies on the LMNG occupying approximately 5,200 acres (or 0.5%) of the 1,025,000 acres on the LMNG. Approximately 50 of the colonies (covering 780 acres) are encroaching on non-Forest Service land. An additional estimated 18 colonies are within a ¼ mile of non-NFS land and could possibly encroach in the future. A new survey of prairie dog colonies is being conducted in 2015 with the results to be available in late fall 2015. The analysis for this project will be based on the most current data.

¹ Management Area (MA) direction, within the DPG LRMP, includes direction for the various MAs within the LMNG. NFS lands on the DPG have been divided into MAs with specific direction identified for each MA.

Dakota Prairie Grasslands Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP)

The 2002 Dakota Prairie Grasslands LRMP provides the overarching direction for management activities on the grasslands. Grassland-wide management goals as well as specific management area and geographic area direction represent the desired condition that management actions are designed to achieve. Direction regarding the prairie dog, listed as both a Regional Forester-designated sensitive species and a management indicator species (MIS), has also been informed and clarified in two district-level conservation assessments in 2006.

Consistent with the LRMP, the DPG follows guidelines to increase overall prairie dog populations by allowing for expanding prairie dog colonies, where appropriate, on NFS lands. Survey data indicates prairie dog populations have increased over time, moving towards the LRMP's estimated total acreages of between 5,400 and 9,400 acres. Therefore, past control measures utilized to manage encroachment of colonies have not appreciably reduced the total species presence on NFS lands.

GRASSLAND-WIDE DIRECTION: For this project, all grassland-wide standards and guidelines will be followed. Those pertinent to this project from the Grassland-wide portion of the DPG LRMP include the following direction:

1. Require mitigation measures to protect the national grassland resources when animal damage control activities are conducted by other governmental entities. Emphasize public safety; threatened, endangered, and sensitive species conservation; water quality protection, or other resource values. **Standard**
2. Limit the use of rodenticides (grain baits) for reducing prairie dog populations to the following situations:
 - Public health and safety risks occur in the immediate area.
 - Damage to private and public infrastructure or facilities, such as cemeteries and residences.
 - To respond to unwanted prairie dog colonization on land adjoining the national grasslands when consistent with state-wide prairie dog conservation strategies. **Standard**
3. Reduce conflicts with adjacent landowners over prairie dog management through an active landownership adjustment program. **Guideline**
4. Restrict the use of rodenticides (above-ground grain baits) for reducing prairie dog populations outside the period October 1 to December 31 to reduce risks to migratory birds. **Guideline**
5. Do not use burrow fumigants in prairie dog colonies. **Standard (pp. 1-18 and 1-19)**

GEOGRAPHIC AREA DIRECTION: Geographic Area direction, within the LRMP, provides further direction. This direction includes desired population trends, habitat quality for management indicator species (MIS) and associated species in the two geographic areas: Badlands and Rolling Prairie geographic areas. (Also see the prairie dog's habitat descriptions in LRMP Appendix H, p. H-4).

- **Black-tailed Prairie Dog (Badlands Geographic Area):** Establish two or more prairie dog colony complexes within the 10 to 15 years. A colony complex is 10 or more colonies with a total combined acreage of at least 1,000 acres. Individual complexes may extend across the adjoining Rolling Prairie or Badlands geographic area. (LRMP, p. 2-14)
- **Black-tailed Prairie Dog (Rolling Prairie Geographic Area):** Establish two or more prairie dog colony complexes within 10 to 15 years. Individual complexes may extend into Theodore Roosevelt National Park or the Badlands geographic area. (LRMP, p. 2-22)

Purpose and Need

The primary purpose of this project is to implement the LRMP as well as direction that can be found in many federal laws concerning the Forest Service's commitment to wildlife. The needs for this project include:

1. Being responsive to public concern for encroachment of prairie dog colonies between various NFS lands and non-NFS lands and comply with the letter and spirit of the good neighbor policy identified in the LRMP. Public concern focuses on public health, agricultural production, land values, and facilities on private and other non-NFS lands.
2. Meeting or moving towards the LRMP guidance to achieve the overall objective for prairie dog colonies including up to four complexes across the LMNG on NFS lands.
3. Managing prairie dog colonies in Management Area (MA) 3.63 Black-footed Ferret Reintroduction Habitat to meet MA guidelines.
4. Taking proactive steps to prevent future unwanted encroachments onto non-NFS.

Proposed Action

The Little Missouri National Grassland (LMNG) proposes to manage prairie dog colonies in three categories.

Category 1: The first category includes those colonies that are entirely on NFS land and more than a ¼ mile from any non-NFS land. In this category, prairie dogs will only be monitored. If monitoring indicates that the acreage goals established in the LRMP have not been met, then some activities such as heavy grazing or mowing could be implemented to encourage expansion of these colonies to meet the acreage goals. Presently there are 69 colonies (3,750 acres) in Category 1.

Category 2: The second category would include all colonies within ¼ mile of non-NFS land but are not currently encroaching onto non-NFS land. If monitoring suggests these colonies are expanding in the direction of non-NFS lands then an array of non-lethal management tools would be employed to direct these colonies away from the non-NFS lands. These include: using visual vegetation barriers, managing for high structure through fenced or non-fenced means, increasing predator effectiveness through raptor perches and screening, prescribed fire, and prescribed grazing. The actual methods employed would be site specific. Through adaptive management, if the initial actions taken were unsuccessful in preventing the colony from moving toward the non-NFS land then other methods would be used. The choice of the next method depends on the cause of the initial action's failure. If the non-lethal diversion actions fail completely and the colony encroaches onto non-NFS lands, the colony would be placed in Category 3 and addressed as such. Currently there are 18 colonies (727 acres) in Category 2.

Category 3: The third category includes colonies presently encroaching on non-NFS lands as well as those damaging infrastructure or posing a health/safety risk with documented plague. At present there are 50 colonies (780 acres) in this category ranging from 0.2 to 96 acres encroaching on non-NFS lands. Initial actions in this category would be to meet with the adjacent landowner and investigate the possibility of obtaining a wildlife easement, land purchase, or a land exchange. If the landowner is unwilling, then poisoning with zinc phosphide would be used to eliminate the entire colony provided the adjacent landowners also treat their side of the colony. The exception to this would be if the colony is very small and the Forest Service biologist felt it would be possible to trap all the prairie dogs and relocate them; adjacent landowners would still be required to treat their property. Given the intermingled ownership pattern and the dynamics of prairie dog colony expansion and contraction, control measures may occur on an annual basis but would generally be expected to decrease after the proposed action's initial effort.

According to Deputy Under Secretary Tenney, reasonable and responsible flexibility will be necessary to accomplish the goals and objectives of the good neighbor policy.

All actions proposed will require prairie dog colonies be monitored at least once every three years. Monitoring would be designed to determine changes in colony size, its location, and the direction of growth, if any.

Timelines

A decision on this project is expected in the spring of 2016. Implementation of project activities is expected to begin the following fall (approximately October 2016) and continue indefinitely or until changed conditions arise that affect objectives, management tools, or desired conditions.

Public Comment Period

Comments, regarding the scope of the proposal, are invited for a period of 30 days to be most helpful in determining the project's issues and alternatives. We ask you provide comments by October 5, 2015, although we will accept comments on the project after this time. Send comments to:

Shannon Boehm, District Ranger
Medora Ranger District
99 23rd Ave. W., Suite B
Dickinson, ND 58601

Email: comments-northern-dakota-prairie-medora@fs.fed.us

This comment period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their concerns known prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. Only those who provide timely and substantive comments will be eligible to object to the decision pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names, addresses, email, and phone numbers will be considered part of the public record, and be available for public inspection.

Your comments may help identify additional actions or alternatives. Comments are most useful when they are site-specific and include a clearly identifiable location.

We anticipate completing the draft Environmental Assessment (EA) in May 2016. At that time, we will send a copy of the EA and draft decision notice to those who commented or requested to receive the documents by mail. We will publish a notice of the release of these documents in the *Bismarck Tribune*, the newspaper of record, and make the document available on the Dakota Prairie Grasslands webpage: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/dpg/landmanagement/projects>. Those who provide comments for either this scoping letter or the EA have standing for the objection process.

Electronic comments should be submitted in MS Word, Word Perfect, or RTF format. Please make sure the subject line contains the name "Prairie Dog Control Project" for which you are submitting comments. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of receipt of comments, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means.

If you need more project information or a copy of the project location map, contact me or the Project Biologist Arden Warm at (701) 227-7800 by phone or awarm@fs.fed.us by email, at the Medora Ranger District.

Please feel free to share this letter with neighbors or other interested parties to comment to the project.

Sincerely,



SHANNON BOEHM
Medora District Ranger

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